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ABSTRACT

Four million people are unemployed in Germany and this is having an impact on the country's universities. Many youngsters who hold university qualifying certificates claim their legal right to attend not because they want a higher education but because they cannot find employment. This booklet tries, by going beyond the facade of "university," to explain why studies drag on so long in Germany. Using case studies and anecdotes to illustrate actual student life in institutions of higher education, the study notes the following: (1) A large number of registered students do not attend lectures, a situation abetted by very low tuition fees; (2) delayed entry due to compulsory military service and the practice of taking internships or apprenticeships to enhance later employment prospects before enrolling in university; (3) "jobbing," or part-time employment, another way in which two-thirds of German college students obtain practical job experience and money; (4) a common attitude that student life should be a period of fulfillment rather than a period of self-denial; (5) almost half of the foreign students (6.8 percent of all students) have no German citizenship but have lived in Germany for extended periods; (6) and the practice by 10 percent of German students of attending a foreign institution for at least one sabbatical year. (DB)

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From Lecture Hall to Job Centre - Life as a Student in Germany

By Horst Ellermann

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Summary

Almost 1.8 million students - 44.3 percent of them female - were registered at German universities in the 1998/99 winter semester according to the Federal Statistical Office. Of the total (WS 1997/98), 6.8 percent were foreigners. Horst Ellermann of the Munich daily newspaper **Süddeutsche Zeitung** describes here how they live, study and work, what studying in a foreign country means to them and how foreign students see universities in Germany.

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Universities - a rich past and an uncertain future

Outside Munich University, a fountain and surrounding pillars and arches are bathed in sunshine. Tourists capture the scene on film. But, strictly speaking, a few people should be around to put life into a holiday photograph - perhaps a group of students. But it's term vacation and only a few of the 60,000 students are here, among them a man aged about 30. A student? Damaso, 33, studies Romance languages and literature. He's rarely to be found in his university institute and is only in Munich because he forgot to re-register for the next semester and has to make his peace with the enrolment office.

Two of the 16 German federal states have recently begun to use tuition fees as a lever to force long-term students like Damaso to get on and complete their studies. But Bavaria - of which Munich is capital - is not among them. So Damaso need pay only a 45 DM registration fee to be able to attend all seminars without charge. But he can also choose to stay away.

Damaso is a student because he still enjoys learning and because, so far, he has not found a fulltime job. He earns his keep by "jobbing around" and is only marginally interested in study. Damaso goes to university in the same way as young members of the nobility in Germany did for centuries. He attends lectures that raise his spirits and doesn't particularly care whether hewill eventually be rewarded with a diploma or an M.A.degree. In fact, Damaso already has an arts degree. But the days when employers snapped up young academics straight from university are over for arts graduates.

Four million people are unemployed in Germany and this is having an impact on the country's universities. Many youngsters with university qualifying certificates claim their legal right to a place at university - not always because they want higher education, but in many cases because they cannot find employment. Many unwittingly choose a course of study only to discover later that it neither suits their abilities nor meets up to their expectations. But the majority just go on studying rather than end up "on the street". Some, like Damaso, take on an additional course if they can't find employment.

Most of the 337 German universities and colleges have lost track of how many "Damasos" and how many serious students are on their rolls. Officially, nearly 1.8 million students are registered - but how many of them ever appear at lectures? University rectors can only shrug their shoulders at this question. Attendance registers are scoffed at - particularly among the

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arts and social sciences. Checks on performance are equally rebuffed with the argument that such interrogation would appear counter-productive within a system aimed at turning out self-reliant and critical individuals. In the engineering and natural science sectors, too, it sometimes takes professors four semesters to find out if their charges have really been applying themselves to their studies. Usually, examinations comparable to the American Bachelor then fall due, but these are not recognised in Germany as final proof of qualification

So, is it true to say that university study in Germany is somewhat of a travesty? Not at all. It is true that students here frequently demonstrate in the streets for their right to a better education. Politicians praise their initiative, say they are right and promise improvements. But it's long ago since anything changed at Germany's places of higher learning. A glance behind the facade of Munich University shows why.

Study: the start of a lifetime of learning

Pubs, cafes, book and stationery shops and photocopying kiosks abound at the rear of the university complex, providing the bustle that's missing outside the main entrance to the campus. Damaso feels at home here and Damaso is not alone. While, at 33, he's older than the average student - 25 - a quarter of his university peers are over the age of 27 years.

Why do studies drag on so long in Germany? For one thing, there's the school system which, in most federal states, has three basic elements. Lower and middle-grade school pupils complete their schooling after 10 school years, but without winning the right to go on and take up studies at college or university. This right is conferred only by the "Gymnasium" - the high school, where pupils achieve general university entrance standard after 13 school years. Almost one third of all young Germans set themselves this aim. Usually, high school pupils are 19 years of age by the time they graduate from "Gymnasium".

Many young males go from school into compulsory military service or community service - the alternative for recognised conscientious objectors to military training. During the "Cold War", they spent up to 15 months in the Bundeswehr or 20 months duty in the social welfare services. These periods have meanwhile been cut by 50 percent. With novice students beginning their studies only in October and April and release from compulsory service not necessarily coinciding with these dates, most of them lose a month or two between two phases in their lives. Usually, they are by then aged 20 - unless they have also done

internships. Young people who opt for this education route - which is highly popular in Germany - spend two to three years with a firm, attending vocational school one day per week. Before starting university, some students take apprenticeships to enhance their employment prospects later through having a period of practical work to their credit.

Young women begin their studies earlier unless they, too, have completed apprentice training. Some seven percent lose this advantage by becoming pregnant during their studies. More often than male students, females begin their studies at theory-orientated universities where courses are longer than the more pragmatically orientated technical universities. However, on average, female students have the edge, graduating at 27 compared to 28 for their male counterparts.

Another question demands an answer: why do average studies last 6.5 years, when the curriculae for most subjects provide for a maximum of 4.5 years to obtain an M.A. or diploma?

The answer to this is to be found in one of the cafes behind Munich University. Here, education theory students Nejla, Franziska and Gudrun relax over coffee and cigarettes. It's 4.15 p.m. and they had actually planned getting down to work earlier - but the fourth member of their group has not yet arrived. Student teacher Markus, who has to attend compulsory seminars on education theory, comes 20 minutes late - five minutes longer than normal for university timekeeping in Germany. Markus finally arrives with an apology: "Sorry, I got hung up in the bookshop". The four finally get their heads together.

The quartette met up at the beginning of the summer term at a seminar on "People and motivation", resolved to work on the theme: "Freud and his theory of sexual energy". The aim is to deliver a one-hour talk to other students, then compere a subsequent half-hour discussion before summarising the results in a 40-page essay. Students prefer to postpone this until periods in which there are no lectures, when they can concentrate more on writing. The problem here is that it's three months since the relevant talk was given. Nejla, Franziska, Gudrun and Markus need the first hour to recapitulate.

"I think people have simply not understood how Freud went from sex drive to vital and mortal energy," Franziska summarises their discussion in the seminar. The others nod their approval. Gudrun asks: "Well, how did he get there?" Silence. The group decides to consult secondary

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literature again and to devote an extra chapter to the question, which Markus will prepare. But Nejla has reservations: "If we deal separately with this subject, we can forget the structure we had." So the discussion about structuring their work begins all over again.

It takes three hours to draw the outline of a new work structure. Nejla is assigned to take it to the lecturer at their university institute. If he has no objections, it will stand as it is. If he does, Nejla will have to let everyone know. Gudrun will have to pass on material to Markus. All will sent their drafts to Franziska in the next four weeks - she has the best computer printer. Franziska will also host the next work session. Students can't always afford to meet in cafes.

The four Munich students have managed this time to master the planning side of their work. But they will have to invest more effort than really necessary because they could probably omit the extra chapter about the death urge - unless there are complaints from their lecturer. Nonetheless, they're all quite happy.

Subjects studied in Germany
Categories, in percentages

• Economics, law & social sciences	31.0
• Language and cultural sciences	22.8
• Engineering sciences	15.0
• Medicine	5.7
• Art, arts sciences	4.3
• Agricultural, forestries & food sciences	2.1
• Sport, sports sciences	1.5

Status: winter sem. 1997/98 *Source: Feder. Statistics Office*

Work groups are not always as harmonious as this. Not all students take such a responsible attitude to work. Many need longer to develop their own initiatives or prepare for exams without direct instructions from lecturers. This partly explains why, on average, German students spend two years longer studying than specified. Nejla, Franziska, Gudrun and Markus have the advantage of having already worked in several groups. They can draw up a plan of action in three hours. Their prospects of completing their studies within the "ideal" period of six years are good. Usually, philosophy students need seven years, lawyers five. It's now seven o'clock in the evening - time for the four students to meet up in the "Alter Simpl".

Jobbing - a bridge to working life

This is one of the pubs located behind the main tract of Munich University. It has been quelling students' thirst for beer since 1903. The biggest glass costs DM 5.50. The bar is manned by students -- cheap labour!

There's Tanja, a student of English language and literature who is here two nights a week, working five-hour stints during both semesters and vacations. "Luckily, the pubs close in Bavaria at one o'clock in the morning," says Tanja, who is from Hamburg. "I can have a good sleep then go fresh to lectures at 10 a.m." She earns DM 17 an hour, which is just above the national average of between DM 12.70 for paid practical training and DM 20.80 for work in trades already mastered. Employers pay a little more in cities with high living costs, such as Munich, Hamburg or Frankfurt.

Tanja is no exception. Two thirds of all German university and college students have regular employment of more than 13 hours per week, and this not just during term holidays. Students with structured classroom curriculae such as that in pharmacy have less scope for earning money than, say, students of politics, who are left with an average maximum of 13 hours per week to attend lectures. Apart from regulation attendance at lectures, the time invested in jobs also depends on age and location. Older students work more, particularly when they live in big cities where prices are higher and personal needs greater.

Tanja has to work because she has used up her repayable government grant, because she receives only a frugal allowance from her parents, but also "because it's good to have some other activity besides study". Her monthly earnings of DM 1,600 are above the national averages - just under DM 1,400 in the old German states and just over DM 1,100 in the new states in eastern Germany. Tanja says one of the beneficial side-effects of earning more than she needs is that she can put money aside for vacations.

But her fellow student Stefan - who works on the other side of the bar - will have nothing left over this summer. He has opted for career-orientated jobbing and is on a traineeship. Stefan's subjects are English and Romance languages and literature but, he says: "One M.A. is no longer enough." He uses an exchange service to obtain the addresses of firms in the Far East then offers himself as a go-between for German firms.

Employers' organisations and chambers of industry and commerce in Bavaria cooperate with the Employment Bureau and Munich University, obtaining the services of students at favourable rates. Thea Payoma, who is responsible for commercial contacts in a joint programme, has a list of more than 30 firms offering on-the-job training. But, she says, payment varies widely and is decreasing. Monthly wages range between DM 600 and DM 800.

She says publishing houses are among the most miserly employers, with a large pool of unemployed teachers, academics and social scientists to choose from. Even graduate doctors are known to accept internships just to make some money. In fact, Ms. Payoma reports, one publishing firm recently called asking what she would offer to pay for a trainee position.

But there are big companies or consultancy firms - in data-processing, for example - with a quite different attitude, offering trainees salaries of up to DM 2,000, often leading on to full-time contracts.

Consultant Jan Rodlin notes that traineeships are steadily increasing in value. When hiring business managers himself, he's always on the lookout for persons with proven practical experience. "They learn nothing at university," he told us. "They all have high-grade qualifications. So how can I assess them if not by the challenges they take on themselves?"

A career start by university graduates without practical job experience is becoming increasingly improbable - as is student life without having to earn money. Working students earn an average of DM 600 per month - money that has long since taken over the role once played by the State in study sponsorship. The repayable government grant - known by its abbreviation "BaföG" - is now nearing 10 percent of the overall student budget. However, parental contributions still represent the lion's share.

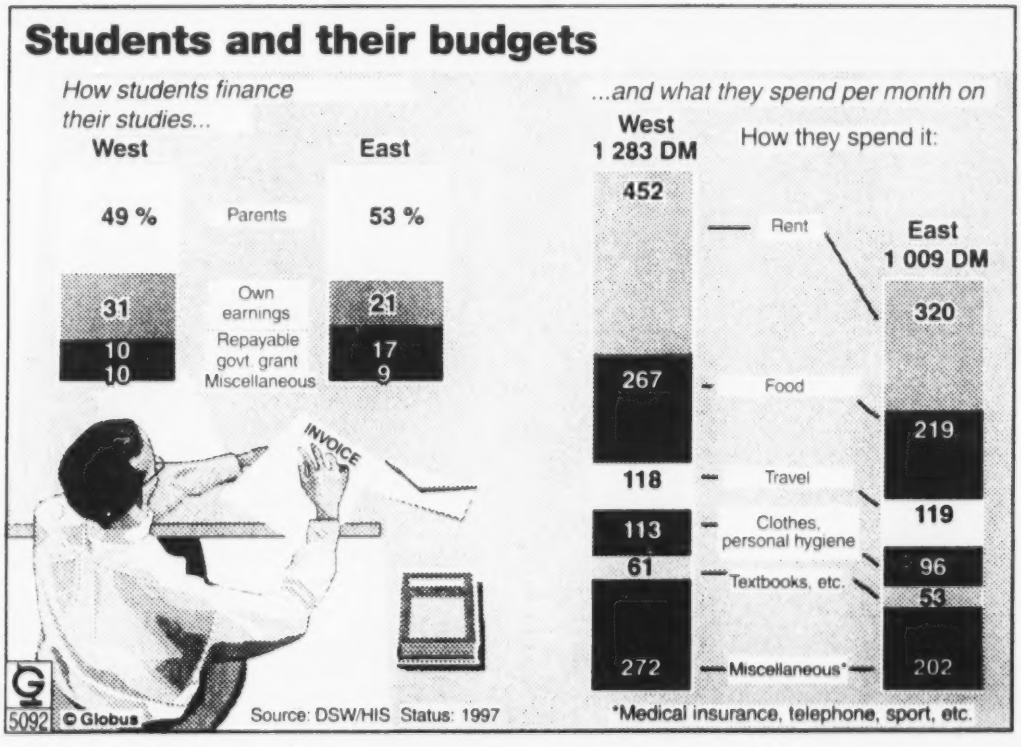
Do students in Germany really have to go out to work? Many of them have no choice. The average student says just covering the cost of living is the second main motive for earning money. The primary motive - according to a survey conducted by the German student organisation DSW - is to cover "extras". "So that I can afford a little more," say university students in the old states, only one in every three of whom says he or she does not have to take a job during studies - unlike their counterparts in the new states who have no need to earn money. The eastern and western regions have come much more into line in the past few years

and it will not be long before they have equal status when it comes to income and expenditure. The fact that most students are compelled to go out and earn money as well as study is one of the main reasons for the comparatively long duration of studies in Germany.

Student life: fulfillment, not self-denial

When Nejla, Franziska, Gudrun and Markus leave their local pub at about 11 p.m., each is DM 11 poorer. Add what they spent earlier in a cafe and the total is about DM 20 -- which is far in excess of a student's budgeted allowance for eating and drinking out. A half-kilogram loaf of bread in Germany costs around DM 3 and a pound of coffee DM 6. A university canteen meal costs about midway between the two. So, with an average outlay on food of DM 240 a month, a student doesn't have money for coffee or beer every day. But that doesn't stop them from living well. Only very few students see their days at university as a time of endless self-denial.

A student in western Germany receives a combined total of DM 1,400 per month in parental contributions, job earnings and State sponsorship. A DSW survey shows that, of this, a



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student spends DM 1,300, more than one third of it on rent (see chart); there's now very little difference in this between East and West. In absolute numbers, this means that students pay an average of DM 320; i.e., easterners pay DM 130 less than westerners for the simple reason that inexpensive accommodation is more readily available in the five new states and rents are still lower than in the rest of Germany.

There are big differences in rent in the old states. "Singles" pay more than DM 600 for the average flat or apartment in the university district of Munich or in the major population centres of western Germany. The average is DM 500 in smaller towns and cities, with the exception of traditional university towns such as Freiburg, Heidelberg or Tübingen. So many students live there that the demand for student accommodation permanently exceeds supply.

Almost half (40 percent) of all students live either alone or with partners in rented accommodation. One in five live in their parental homes and the same number in shared-rent accommodation (known in Germany as "Wohngemeinschaften" - WGs) which has become increasingly popular in recent years. It's no longer true to say that these generally emulate the politically motivated cohabitation of the 1970s or that participants are forced by lack of money to live in cramped conditions. Today's "WG" (pronounced "vay-gay") has a bit of both and is socially acceptable, even if males and females cohabitate.

Fifteen percent of students live in hostels, particularly foreign students, who have difficulty finding accommodation on the open market. Many private renters turn foreigners away, especially if they can't show proof of income and speak little German. Sub-letting - once the most widespread form of student accommodation - has more or less died out, with a mere three percent of students living under the watchful eyes of landladies.

Travel costs, clothes and personal hygiene - each accounting for DM 100 per month - are further major budget items. Medical insurance (not a parental responsibility from the age of 25 years on), telephone bills, leisure interests and other miscellaneous items add up to another DM 272.

A final item of expenditure shows that German students see themselves less and less as mere students: they buy learning aids worth DM 61 per month - exactly the same amount stated at the last DSW survey in 1994. Price increases have not affected this. This low-spending item is said to reflect changing attitudes in which study is no longer the main focus of life. Students

spend half as much on books as on clothes and body care. No longer do they struggle through university to complete their studies as quickly as possible. Increasingly, they begin careers or - for seven percent of them - start families of their own before completing their university degrees.

Contacts: foreign students in Germany

We find Doo-Nam busy whipping cream. The student from Korea is visiting German friends. There are two interesting things about this: for one, Doo-Nam has never whipped cream before. "We don't have it in Korea," he points out. For another, Doo-Nam doesn't often receive invitations from Germans - a fact bemoaned by many foreign students.

Rolf Holtkamp, an assistant working for the University Information System HIS in Hanover, reports that communication with German students is regarded particularly by students from the so-called developing or threshold countries as far from satisfactory. But he says the hosts' aversion to contact with foreigners is only one of many factors explaining why fewer and fewer foreign students are coming to study in Germany. The HIS report on the attractiveness of German universities offers further reasons, among them that "guest students" feel neglected by lecturers, that they are left in the dark about courses and their duration and that German universities are - they say - poorly equipped. Holtkamp bases his observations on the findings of a 1994 survey by the DSW. For him, the multicultural future of German universities does not look at all rosy.

Yet the facts and figures do not look all that bad. More than 140,000 foreign students attended German universities in 1994 and their number almost doubled in the last decade. The proportion of foreigners has reached more than seven percent and is still rising. There were smaller increases in France and Canada. Japan and, moreso, Australia are the "stars" of the growth-rates. Seen thus - according to the HIS report, in which Holtkamp includes comparative figures from UNESCO - Germany is in the mainstream of international development.

Almost half of all foreign students at German universities are officially listed as "educational inlanders" - they have no German citizenship but have lived in Germany for extended periods and sat their university qualifying examinations here. Turks (almost 15 percent) form the largest of these groups, followed by Iranians (9 percent) and Greeks (6 percent). Holtkamp

says it would be wrong to use the positive views of these "ungenuine" foreigners as a yardstick for the attractiveness of German universities. Nor is he much impressed with the large attendance of Austrians at German universities.

Holtkamp insists that Germany has lost its pull as a magnet for foreign students. The Federal Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Technology, too, complains that too few students are coming here from the Asia-Pacific region and voices particular alarm at the drop in numbers from Indonesia. In the 1970s, the Federal Republic of Germany was the main destination for Indonesians studying abroad - a role now taken over by students from the USA.

This fits well into the image of declining German universities often described by German politicians who say that not only Indonesians but east Europeans and even the French are increasingly staying away. Examples pointing to an opposite trend - Poles or the relatively unfluctuating American influx - are disregarded by both the ministry and HIS. Skeptics find little comfort, either, in the intake of innumerable Chinese and Tibetans from the People's Republic (5.4 percent of all foreign students; trend still increasing).

Could Hartmut Schiedermair, President of the German University Association, be right in asserting that politicians place too much stress on the negative aspects of Germany's universities? Schiedermair does not deny the falling numbers in some categories of foreign student. But he sees one of the causes rooted elsewhere: "All the talk about assertedly declining universities is gradually finding listeners abroad". He sees a parallel interaction between talk and consequence in regard to Germany's alleged loss of attraction to foreign investors.

Rolf Holtkamp's HIS report does not exactly improve the image of the German university either when he emphasises how many foreign students criticise inferior equipment and sub-standard teaching quality. He makes no mention of the fact that a majority of foreigners hold both in high esteem. He rightly points out that critical candidates - those who don't even come to Germany - could not be interviewed for the DSW survey. But he also omits the fact that those actually questioned gave a higher rating to equipment and teaching quality than did the Germans themselves.

Foreigners point a critical finger at shortcomings or failings for which the universities are not to blame. Another explanation for why Doo-Nam has never whipped cream is that there is no whisk in the kitchen of his hostel. "But that has its advantages," he adds, "the noise of an electric beater would carry everywhere through the thin walls." Almost half of the students from developing countries and as many as 37 percent of those from industrialised states live in hostels of this or similar design. But most of them are glad to have found anywhere to stay.

As to communication difficulties, it must be said that German is not a popular language because it is difficult to learn and of only limited use internationally. This is why pilot projects have begun at 12 German universities in which lectures are given in German and English. The idea is to make Germans more open-minded and help in this way to bring more foreign students into the country.

But what's the point if the hosts don't pay enough attention? Under the very noses of his hosts for the evening, Doo-Nam has whipped and beaten the cream so long that it has congealed into butter. No one told him when to stop whipping.

Experience: German students abroad

One tenth of all German students leave their home university for at least one sabbatical year abroad. For some politicians specialising in education, this quite satisfactorily fulfils the 10 percent quota recommended by the European Union (EU). Others cry "rubbish" and a spokesperson for the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) says the figures have been doctored to look better than reality. Precisely three percent of technology college students undertook stays abroad and, in any case "one quarter of those go to Austria or Switzerland. Surely that's not enough."

According to UNESCO statistics, more than 40,000 Germans registered for a foreign semester for each of the half-year terms of 1993. Even if the gain in language skills resulting from visits to Austria or German-speaking regions of Switzerland is limited, a 2.2 percent ratio of students abroad keeps Germany far ahead of other European countries such as France (1.3 percent), Great Britain (1.4 percent) or the Netherlands (1.9 percent) - not to speak of Russia (0.1 percent) or the USA (0.2 percent).

So what of the harsh judgement occasionally pronounced, to the effect that German students are not mobile enough? Some education conservatives probably still dream of the days when travel was regarded as part of classicist learning and study sojourns abroad as quite natural. In the winter semester 1911/12, for example, more than double the number of German students than today allowed themselves the luxury of attending foreign universities. Most of them fluent in French, they travelled the world gathering knowledge about alien lands and cultures. These sons and daughters of the wealthy had no cash-flow worries.

This has all changed, at the very latest since the advent of mass universities after the Second World War. The ratio of students enrolled abroad is falling and even national or European Union sponsorship has done little to change things. "The strong socio-cultural influence on the education attitudes appears to be enduring," says social scientist Peter Müssig-Trapp of HIS. "Students of lower-grade social origin opt for studies abroad only half as frequently as those from higher social strata."

Money is the main obstacle. Sixty percent of students from all disciplines shy away from the extra financial burden of spending a semester abroad. Psychology and pedagogy students in particular appear to suffer most from being separated from partners, friends and their home environment. Natural scientists and budding business leaders begrudge what they say as the loss of valuable time. Informatics students openly admit that personal lack of enterprise makes them prefer to stay at home.

"Of course I would like to have spent two semesters in Italy," says Berlin student Thorsten Raabe. "But now that it has taken me five semesters to get work as a tutor, I'm not going to risk losing this source of income." He consoles himself with the hope that he can go to "bella Italia" during the semester vacation.

Sponsorship programmes bringing in DM 300 per month help a little in such cases. They ease the financial burden on parents resolved to fund their offspring's visits abroad. Students who don't have this support refuse the modest grants. And some 30 percent of those not reliant on jobs travel abroad for practical training, language tuition or study courses. The number drops by half in the case of students in gainful employment for more than 20 hours per week. A study by HIS indicates that students claiming to have more money at their disposal than their peers travel to foreign climes more often than the less priveleged.

The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) is aware of this disparity. Its annual report reiterates the aim of covering the full living expenses of scholarship-holders. But the gap has continued to widen in recent years. An increased total of 55,000 scholarship winners confronts a reduced budget of DM 360 million. But the DAAD is pressing ahead with its efforts to bring demand into line with realities.

"First the bad news: the financial problems of both the federal and state governments - and hence those of the universities - have worsened dramatically," says Professor Theodor Berchem, the DAAD president. It's no longer the costs of German reunification, but the consequences of globalisation that are reducing the money supply.

"But it's globalisation - and this is the good news - that is sharpening awareness of the importance of international networking and cooperation," says Berchem. The DAAD received more cash from business and industry last year and this increased generosity is attributable mainly to a growing demand for English-speaking experts and specialists. According to Peter Müssig-Trapp and Klaus Schnitzer of HIS, this additional qualification is expected less of psychologists and educators (eight percent) than of electro-technicians and machinebuilders (56 percent).

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